

NAVAL POSTGRADUATE SCHOOL,
DEPARTMENT OF NATIONAL SECURITY AFFAIRS
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***THE OTTOMAN EMPIRE:
SHARI'A-MILITARY ALLIANCE, 1512-1718***

by

Michael S. Grogan

Major, United States Marine Corps

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Instructor: Professor Ralph Magnus

Tues/Thurs NS3300

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*Excellent comparisons
to other sources,*

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THE OTTOMAN EMPIRE: SHARI'A-MILITARY ALLIANCE, 1512-1718

This is a review of the significant highlights from Marshall G. S. Hodgson's chapter on "The Ottoman Empire: Shari'a-Military Alliance, 1517-1718," from his book *The Gunpowder Empires*. In this article Mr. Hodgson discusses the Ottoman Empire from the height of its expansion under Suleyman the Magnificent (or Law Giver to the Muslims) to the period of decline which is punctuated by the Ottoman's defeat in Vienna in the early 18th Century. The author describes the unique cultural, religious, and political alliance which characterized the Ottoman Empire during this period. By uniting the military slave-household of the Padishah (or sultan) in deed with that of the purpose of the Shari'a as upheld by the 'ulama' (Islamic scholars) the Ottoman's created an imperial juggernaut for a time which was wisely feared by both the East and the West.

What I will discuss in this review is the central theme of the article which discusses the absolutist regime of the Ottoman's, its unique military structure, its alliance with the Shari'a, and the empire's expansion, eventual corruption, and decline by the beginning of the 18th Century. To illustrate Hodgson's article, I have chosen some salient illustrations of battles and events under selected sultans (or as Hodgson refers to them, *padishahs*) of the period which mark significant points of Ottoman ascendancy and decline. I have complimented information in this article with gleanings from works by Ira M. Lapidus and R Ernst and Trevor N. Dupuy.

Ottoman absolutism during this period was built upon centralized controls with the authority of the Padishahs, "combining patrimonial, Shari'a and imperial dimensions."¹ At its core was a system based on the absolute authority of the Padishah. The Padishah's central power, to include the military and the government's administrative branches, were viewed as one combined great army in personal service to the

¹ Lapidus, Ira M. *A History of Islamic Societies* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1988), 318.

monarch.² This absolutist state of existence came gradually upon the ghazi warrior descendants. As the former ghazi warrior leaders became a prosperous aristocracy their social position changed and their attitudes changed with them; however, what did not change was the persistent traditions of the frontier ghazi's regarding their destiny to subjugate the infidels.³

THE RULING INSTITUTION

Two notable institutions were created by the Ottoman padishahs to form their monolithic military government structure termed here as the "ruling institution."⁴ It consisted of the military organization of the Janissaries and the civil bureaucracy of the empire. These institutions evolved from the practice by the Ottoman leaders of employing captured prisoners as mercenary troops. Later on, during the conquest of the Balkans, the Turks, with the religious sanction of the grand mufti, took--as a levy called *devshirme*—young males from the Christian population, becoming "slaves" of the padishah. These boys were completely severed from their Christian families and were converted to Islam. They were imbued with religious devotion to Islam and loyalty to only the Padishah. Some were trained as court pages for service as administrators and officials in the state bureaucracy while the remainder provided military education for service in the feared Janissary corps, recognized in the 15th and 16th Centuries as the best trained and most effective soldiers of Europe.⁵ With a military force and a bureaucracy thus recruited from the non-Turkish and non-Moslem subjects, the earlier Ottoman sultans secured effective control over the empire. This they were able to maintain until the forces of corruption inherent in a military state based essentially on exploitation undermined the integrity of the Ruling Institution and changed basically the structure of the Janissary organization. Likewise, with the allegiances the old ghazi warrior aristocracy drifting, Mehmed II sought an alternative power base.

² Hodgson, Marshall G. S. "The Ottoman Empire: Shari'a-Military Alliance, 1517-1718," *The Gunpowder Empires*, 99.

³ Hodgson, 100.

⁴ The term "ruling institution" was coined by Professor Albert Howe Lyber in *Government of the Ottoman Empire in the Time of Suleiman the Magnificent*, 1913, and is meant to connote more than just "government," instead indicating an organization with a central, coercive power.

Hodgson notes that, with the introduction of gunpowder, the Ottoman infantry became the most crucial military arm of the empire. From Mehmed II to Suleyman (1520-66) the number and variety of infantry corps increased dramatically. The most highly trained and feared was that of the Janissaries—who formed the heart of the army.⁶

As was previously mentioned, the Janissaries were almost exclusively drawn by conscription from among the adolescent sons of Christian families—chiefly in the Balkans—in a levy called *devshirme*. In a way, the *devshirme* amounted to a tax in manpower upon the Christian populations. This convention provided the Ottoman Empire with a more regular supply of manpower for its slave army. These young boys were trained first in a rural household in order to learn the Ottoman Turkic language and be converted to Islam. They would then report back to Istanbul for training in specialized service with the bulk destined for infantry ranks; however, promising draftees were selected for future officership—either in Janissary Corps or a high office of state as well as pages for the royal court. The most important element all shared was their total lack of connections within established Ottoman society except to the Padishah himself — insurance of total allegiance and loyalty. To ensure this state continued the Janissaries were not allowed to marry, lest their ties to the royal household become diluted.⁷ As the empire grew in size and power, the importance of the *devshirme* conscription increased as well.⁸ The elite Janissaries were paid directly from the central treasury and were at the disposal of the Padishah without reservation; unlike those with military land grants whose allegiances might be less zealous.⁹ They were also closely associated with the religious order of the Bektash Dervishes, whose *agha* (chief) held a commission as colonel in the Janissary organization. Dervishes were attached to all the military units of the Janissaries in their barracks and to the

⁵ Barbir, Karl K. *Ottoman Rule In Damascus, 1708-1758* (Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1980) 45. Princeton Univ. Press, 1980.

⁶ Hodgson, 102-3

⁷ Hodgson, 102.

⁸ Lapidus, 316-17; Hodgson, 101-104.

⁹ Hodgson, 100.

troops in the field.¹⁰ Thus the Janissaries closely affiliated with the Muslim institution of 'ulamas', muftis, and qadis acquired elements of political power which eventually became a threat to the padishahs.¹¹

The companion idea--that the "army" was at the personal service of the Padishah--was reinforced by an intensive elaboration of the tradition of military slavery developed from the times of the Abbasids. They were considered personal slaves of the monarch, though the reality is different than the Western mind's image of the terms use here. The Ottoman's idea of slave translates better as eternally in service and submission to the Padishah. Thus, the monarch's chief advisor would be a "slave" who, in turn, would have his own "slaves" at his direction, and so on¹²

The Padishah's governing structure consisted of a Grand Vizier, who stood at the head of the whole structure (Chief of Staff) combining duties as an effective commander-in-chief in war and master of the fiscal and judicial processes during peacetime and was assisted by lesser viziers. Likewise, two generals (*beglerbegi*) and two "army" qadi's (*kazi'asker*), one each responsible for Rumelia and the other in Anatolia, also assisted in administration for their respective areas.¹³ Although the Grand Vizier wielded much power, under absolutist principle, the monarch still was the final determinator of all "slaves" (subjects) under him – including the Grand Vizier—who might find his services terminated with summary execution if the Padishah deemed it so.¹⁴

The central headquarters of this regime was referred to as the High Gate due to the prominent structure there – it was a nickname that stuck and soon became a synonym for the Ottoman government as a whole; however, the seat of government was where ever the Padishah and his army happened to be. This "army" has been referred to as the "ruling institution"—with the *kalemiyyeh* (bureaucrats) and the *seyfiyyeh*

¹⁰ Barbir, Karl K.. *Ottoman Rul in Damascus, 1708-1758* (Princeton, New Jersey:Princeton Univ. Press, 1980): 45-6.

¹¹ Hodgson, 104.

¹² Hodgson, 102.

¹³ Hodgson, 112-13.

¹⁴ Hodgson, 102.

(military)-- wielding all central power as one block. They were free from taxation, subject to military laws and military qadis.¹⁵ The central power was a single conquering army. It implies a sharp contrast to the Muslim religious establishment, which was well integrated at its top into the absolutism.¹⁶

Selim I enlarged the empire, then, the most important segments of the central power structure were organized as a single army, with the emperor—the padishah—at its head. Within this army not only soldiers but many kinds of administrators held military rank and were compensated either by a military land grant or on the military payroll. Rewards were conceived in military terms; the revenues of the whole empire were allotted to members of the Ottoman ruling class according to their military contributions.

THE RELIGIOUS INSTITUTION

The Shari'a

Shari'a translates into English as “the path to be followed,” signifying not just Muslim law, but the totality of the Islamic way of life. The tenants of the Shari'a are studied and evoked most earnestly by the 'ulama', the collective term for the scholars and learned men of Islamic faith.¹⁷ The Padishah's authority was derived from his role as executor of the Shari'a therefore, as the monarch he was responsible to the Shari'a and, in turn, his subjects were responsible to him. A spirited zeal was also gained from the old, frontier ghazi sense of community and mission, combining with the Shari'a to play a major role in the empire, becoming the seminal single inspiration of the higher cultural forms of the courtly life itself. Likewise, the 'ulama' enjoyed a correspondingly high role in Ottoman society.¹⁸

¹⁴ Hodgson, 102.

¹⁵ Hodgson, 102.

¹⁶ Hodgson, 101.

¹⁷ Lapidus, 926.

¹⁸ Hodgson, 104.

The 'Ulama'

As the Shari'a was embraced by the empire the "religious institution" of the 'ulama', which once stood aloof from the regime, now allowed themselves to play a state role, institutionalizing the Shari'a's authority at a high state level instead of its once private sphere.¹⁹ Before now, the 'ulama' had always accepted the de facto military rulers (*emirs*) of their Islamic society, amounting to outright allegiance. As the 'ulama' accepted this new state role they helped unify nearly all strata of Ottoman society. For, by combining the Shari'a element with his military absolutism, the Padishah centralized the Shari'a in state life. Although the union appears suddenly in the Ottoman Empire's history, the environment for this alliance had actually been slowly evolving over time. The 'ulama', once ignored and thought of as cloistered and bookish by the military now cultivated a profound respect as the mainstays of communal solidarity. Thus, the Shari'a and 'ulama' were increasingly called on to define the norms of life rather than the Sufi masters.²⁰

The landed aristocracy, descended from the ghazi, accepted the religious lead of the urban upper classes. The cause of Islam against the infidel was the cause of the main body of the Muslim community. Something of the older form of the ghazi spirit survived among the Janissary Corps who, though conscripts, had something of zeal of converts, representing the communal principle.²¹ They supplanted, as Muslims, the formerly Christian land levies which older the older empire once made for their service—until eventually the landed military class became exclusively Muslim and after this point presented a rigidly communal Muslim front to imperial enemy's.

ALLIANCE AND ASCENDANCY

During Selim I's (1512-20) short reign, the Ottomans moved southward and eastward into Syria, Mesopotamia (Iraq), Arabia, and Egypt. At Mecca, the chief shrine of Islam, he took the title of caliph, ruler

¹⁹ Hodgson, 109.

²⁰ Hodgson, 107.

of all Muslims. The Ottoman padishah's were thereafter the spiritual heads of Islam thereby displacing the centuries-old caliphate of Baghdad. *no longer in Baghdad, if anything, refugees in Cairo from 1258* By acquiring the holy places of Islam, Selim I cemented his position as the religion's most powerful ruler. This gave the Ottomans direct access to the rich cultural heritage of the Arab world. Leading Muslim intellectuals, artists, artisans, and administrators came to Constantinople from all parts of the Arab world. They made the empire much more of a traditional Islamic state than it had been to this point. Under Selim, this emphasis on communal Islam was carried to its logical point of internal discrimination: Not only must Ottomans be Muslims, they must be Jamai-Sunni, even Hanafi Muslims; and the unprecedented massacring of Shi'is reinforced this drive for a communalist conformity.²²

Under Suleyman the Magnificent (1520-66) the empire's central institutions were codified in a Shari and communalist sense. Suleyman established Ottoman policy toward the various dissenting minorities that could not be allowed the status of protected dhimmi non-Muslims but could not be ignored by the centralized Jamai-Sunnism of the empire—in particular the Shi'i tariqahs. This period has been dubbed “the Golden Age” due to the extensive conquests and riches they delivered to the ruling institution. The solidarity of absolutism, channeling all resources into the central army of conquest, made for a constant pressure and desire for further conquering. Under Suleyman and Selim II, Ottoman imperial power was extended in all directions. “The ancient ideal of the absolute monarchy, now given a monolithic military form, was granted the full support of the ‘ulama’ and incorporated the Shari’a, gaining the best synthesis of these elements then had ever been achieved before.”²³ The military machine of the absolutist monarchy executed its campaigns in the holy name of Islamic supremacy, annexing new lands.²⁴ Likewise, the ‘ulama’ allowed an institutionalization of the Shari’a, which stood in contrast to its traditional apolitical freedom. Something like the integration of the political power of Islam and its public conscience was achieved—at least on a regional basis.²⁵ In this pursuit, all of the Padishah's subjects were committed to an “imperial vision of Islamic

²¹ Hodgson, 107.

²² Hodgson, 107.

²³ Hodgson, 111.

²⁴ Lapidus, 322.

²⁵ Hodgson, 111.

expansion” in which the Padishah was “glorified as a warrior prince, as a Muslim Caliph, and as a conquering emperor.”²⁶

However, these triumphs would quickly crack and fade with each successive Padishah. The permeation of the Islamic Shari’a through all levels of government perpetuated an aloofness to new ideas—especially those from the West. Confronted first with the European Renaissance and later by the innovations in technical development in the West, many Ottoman elite ignored its significance; although some in the empire recognized the importance and tried to assimilate concepts of the Renaissance, it was not a revelation that translated well into Oriental thought. Further, the Ottoman’s allowed corruption to infect its society, which would eventually weaken the Empire’s ability to sustain its once feared reputation.

CORRUPTION AND DECLINE

During Suleyman's long reign the Ottoman Empire was at the height of its political power and close to its maximum geographical extent. The seeds of decline, however, were already planted. As Suleyman grew tired of campaigns and retired to his harem, his viziers, or prime ministers, took more authority. After his death the army maintained control of the sultanate and was able to use it for its own benefit. Few sultans after Suleyman had the ability to exercise real power when the need arose. This weakness at home was countered by a growing power in the west. The nation-states of Europe were emerging from the Middle Ages under strong monarchies. They were building armies and navies that were powerful enough to attack a decaying Ottoman military might.²⁷

The growing weakness of the Padishahs during the 17th Century resulted in the granting of more privileges to the Janissaries, whose officers became a class exempted from the burdens of taxation that even the Muslim population bore. Gradually, the very structure of Janissary organization transformed,

²⁶ Lapidus, 322.

²⁷ Hodgson, 123.

becoming more civilianized in character.²⁸ Because of the opportunities open to the officers, many Janissaries sought to have their children enrolled within the Corps. By the last quarter of the 17th Century the Janissaries ceased to use the devshirme conscription levy. Meanwhile, many ill-paid Janissary privates engaged in crafts and commercial activities, becoming prominent in so-called "corporations," which were comparable to the craft and merchant guilds of medieval Europe. This military organization holding a specially privileged position closely allied with a powerful religious brotherhood, eventually became intimately associated with important economic organizations. It thus grew to be a potent instrument of political power.²⁹ Through the use of riots and mutinies, the Janissaries forced the padishahs to dismiss members of the Divan and grand viziers, and even deposed the rulers themselves.³⁰ The growing corruption of the Janissary corps undermined the military power of the Ottoman Empire and exposed it to foreign invasion. It threatened the very existence of orderly government. The consequences of the decline of absolutism were very visible. The once rapid expansion ceased and these specialized units were no longer able to pay for themselves through plunder. The central administration required steady supplies of cash to maintain these forces which it lacked. And exacerbating the situation was the huge influx of gold and silver from the Americas by the Spanish creating a worldwide inflation in silver-based prices, creating social and economic disruptions.³¹

Illustrating this steady decline effectiveness that the corruption caused to the Ottoman's military regime are several battles and campaigns of this later period. Shortly after Sulyeman's reign, from 1569-70, the Ottoman Empire was defeated in its war with Russia losing Muslim territories. Likewise, in 1571 the combined fleets of Venice, Spain, and the Papal States of Italy commanded by Don Juan of Austria defeated the Turks in the great naval Battle of Lepanto, off the coast of Greece. Turkish Admiral Pasha Ali Monizindade lost 60 ships aground, 53 sunk, and 117 captured. Although the Ottoman's rebuilt their navy

²⁸ Hodgson, 127.

²⁹ Dupuy, 502.

³⁰ Hodgson 127; Lapidus 316-18.

³¹ Hodgson, 130.

and continued to control the eastern Mediterranean for another century, the defeat at Lepanto once and for all dispelled the myth of the invincibility of the Turks.³² Under Murad III (1574-95) new campaigns were undertaken, however, in the Battle of Sissek in 1593, the Austrian army annihilated the army led by the Ottoman governor of Bosnia. Later, the Caucasus was conquered, and Azerbaijan was seized, but the Ottomans were driven out of the Caucasus and Azerbaijan in 1603. They were also lost control of Iraq in 1604 only to be retaken again under Murad IV (1623-40) in 1638. A war with Venice (1645-69) exposed Constantinople to an attack by the Venetian navy.³³ These continued defeats demonstrate the trend up until the beginning of 1683, when the Ottomans attack Vienna for the last time and—after 41 years of intermittent warfare—retired and sign a peace treaty. As a result, the empire lost much of its Balkan territory and all the possessions on the shores of the Black Sea and was saddled with constant interventions by the Austrians and Russians into the empire's affairs allegedly on the behalf of the its Christian subjects.³⁴

Internally, the weakness of the central government manifested in these military losses also showed itself in a gradual loss of control over most of the provinces. Local rulers, called notables, carved for themselves permanent regions in which they ruled directly, regardless of the wishes of the Padishah in Constantinople. The notables were able to build their power bases because they knew of the Padishah's military weakness and because local populations preferred their rule to the corrupt administration of the faraway capital. The notables formed their own armies and collected their own taxes, sending only nominal contributions to the imperial treasury. The once feared Janissaries were now merely another local army stationed at the High Gate and, as the central government became weaker, large parts of the empire began to act independently, retaining only nominal loyalty to the Padishah.

Why did this occur? Because the absolutism of the Ottoman Empire had been based on its military prestige, but its central authority was replaced with general decentralization. Central appointments were

³² Dupuy, R. Ernst and Trevor N. Dupuy. *The Encyclopedia of Military History From 3500 B.C. to the Present, Second Revised Edition*. (New York: Harper & Row, Publishers, 1986), 501-3.

fully corrupted: unqualified men with wealth and connections drew the pay while appointing their own managers to actually do the work. The Ottoman Empire's weakening occurred first at the top, with the elimination of the old military ghazi aristocracy as rivals for governmental power and a check to the slave-army, true absolute power was attained by the slave-military. The civilianized officer class within the slave household became almost the sole power in the state; however, corruption quickly proliferated in this new dynamic illustrated by the sale of state office positions.³⁵ Although these state appointments were awarded upon merit with the monetary gift as a secondary issue, very soon the monetary exchange became the sole driver of appointments, undermining the entire process.³⁶

Gradually, the *devshirme* was abandoned and officer officials formed their own semi-hereditary privileged group which – unlike the older military aristocracy – lived off their offices rather than the productive means of a military land grant. Finally, by the early 18th Century, the central armed forces were themselves civilianized wholesale. The Janissaries were permitted to supplement their income in civilian trades yet remain tax free as army men who were only subject to military courts, causing the slave-military discipline to become blurred at all levels of the central Ottoman bureaucracy. Moreover, the decline of military discipline accelerated during a series of internal conflicts, including the insubordination of the Janissaries themselves, obstructed the Ottoman's struggles with the foreign opponents like the Austrians, Poles and Safavids.³⁷ By the end of the period covered in Hodgson's chapter, the decay and decline of the Ottoman absolutist power was marked, however, the author does remark that the Ottoman society continued vigorous throughout the 17th Century and into the 18th Century—though in a different form than its absolutist roots.³⁸

³³ Lapidus 317; Dupuy 502.

³⁴ Dupuy, 503-4.

³⁵ Suleyman himself demanded a present from those he appointed to office—a cost the individual passed down to subordinates and so on. In a sense this became an indirect tax.

³⁶ Hodgson, 127.

³⁷ Hodgson, 128.

³⁸ Hodgson, 133.

CONCLUSION

In summary, beginning in 1512 during the reign of Selim I, the Ottoman Empire developed a unique imperial system, which became a feared power in the 15th and 16th Centuries. At the core was the absolutism of the padisah, or sultan, who had in his service a slave army of military and bureaucrats coined as the “ruling institution.” With the conquest of the sacred shrines of Islam, the Ottomans allied themselves with the religious institution of the Shari’a which permeated its structure, providing a high drive among all class levels to expand power and Islam--especially into the realms of the infidel. This combination proved a powerful, reaching its apogee during the Golden Age of Suleyman the Magnificent; however, these gains were fleeting. Pervasive corruption throughout the military and civil service of the “ruling institution” changed the dynamics of the slave-household. Once socially isolated by design, the Janissaries were allowed more and more control until they created a hereditary military caste by allowing their children to enter Janissary ranks. This, along with other official corruption, upset the very tenets which made the Ottoman Empire such a juggernaut on the battlefields of Europe. Soon brought weakness and decline to the state until finally in 1718, they were forced to forever surrender their dreams of total Islamic domination of Europe, becoming the prey of growing military powers in Europe and Russia.

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